



# REPARATIONS: A CASE STUDY **THE BENIN BRONZES**

Using items from the [Bernie Grant Archive collection](#), this resource uses the Africa Reparations Movement's 'Return the Benin Bronzes' campaign to explore activism around the return of looted artefacts

## Key Stages 3-5

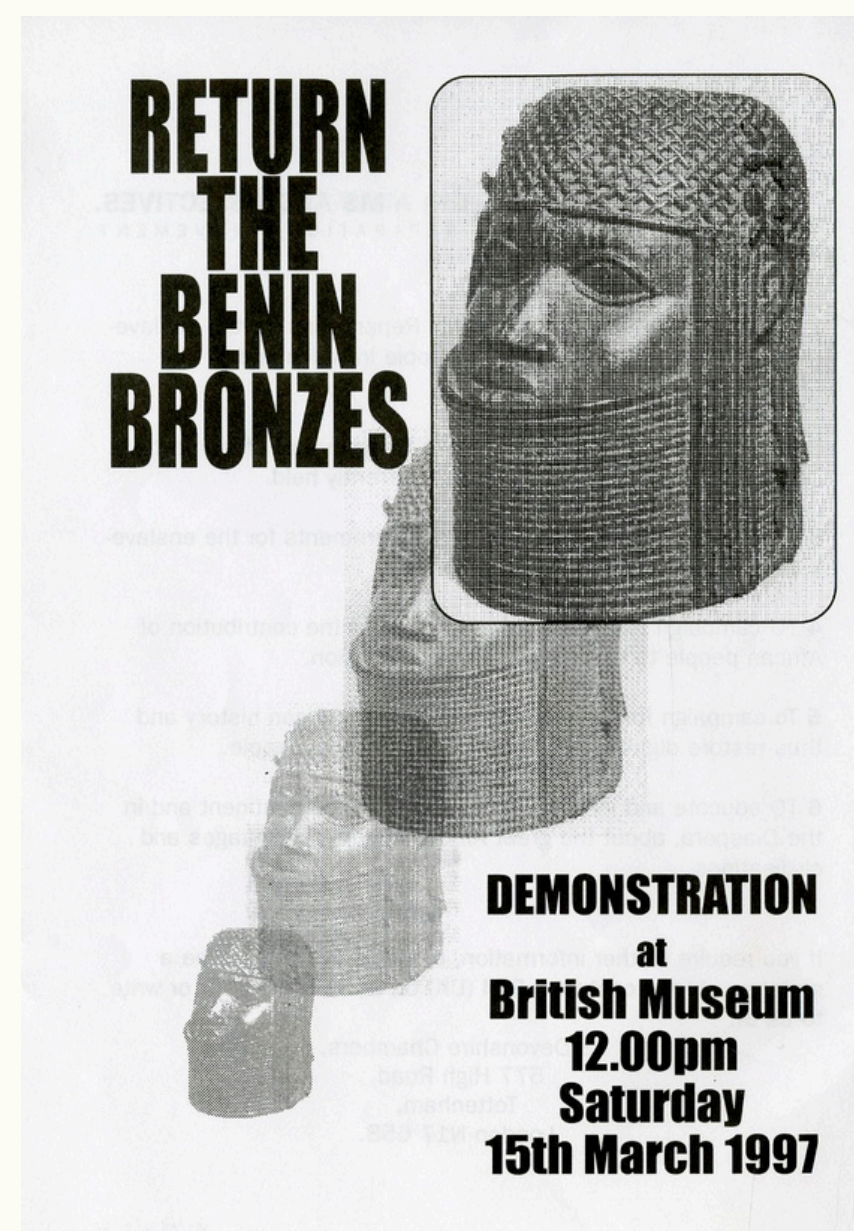
### Learning Objectives:

- Understand what the Benin Bronzes are and their cultural significance
- Learn how the Benin Bronzes were looted and why there is a struggle to restore them to their rightful owners
- Consider what the 'Return the Bronzes' campaign teaches us about the work of the Africa Reparations Movement

Return the Benin Bronzes  
Campaign flyer, Bishopsgate  
Institute: BG/ARM/4/4

## BACKGROUND

Throughout the 1800s, many European nations began to turn their attentions away from the Transatlantic Slave Trade, toward the 'Scramble' for Africa's land and rich resources. During this Scramble, in 1897, British colonial forces sacked the historic kingdom of Benin, located in present-day southern Nigeria.



As part of this military invasion, some 5,000 artistic treasures known as the Benin Bronzes were stolen. Many of them date back to the 13th century, and are elaborate pieces of art made of brass or bronze. Many of the looted items were then given to Queen Victoria, or were kept or sold by the soldiers themselves. As a result, the Benin Bronzes have ended up in museums and galleries across Britain and the world, and there have been numerous campaigns over the years for their rightful return back to Nigeria.



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### AFRICA REPARATIONS MOVEMENT

The Africa Reparations Movement (A.R.M) was set up by Bernie Grant MP in 1993. As part of its work, ARM investigated museums and galleries across Britain that had Benin Bronzes in their possession, and requested their return. As the Benin Bronzes were looted during the period of colonialism, A.R.M viewed their return as a key part of the process to repairing the damage that had been done to Africa and its cultural heritage.

**Note:** Reparations is a term with Latin origins, meaning to 'repair' or 'restore'. The movement for African Reparations seeks justice for the crimes which have been committed against Africa, Africans and people of African descent over the last 500 years, such as the Transatlantic Slave Trade, colonisation of the African continent, and the affects of racism



Bernie Grant with members of A.R.M picketing outside the museum of mankind



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### MUSEUM RESPONSES

The African Reparations Movement wrote to British museums and galleries who possessed Benin Bronzes, requesting their rightful return.

In 1997, after having met with Bernie Grant to discuss the issue of returning the Bronzes, the director of the Glasgow Museum famously rejected the A.R.M's request. Glasgow Museum was of course not the only museum to do so. The British Museums Act, provided museums and galleries with a justification for rejecting these requests. The Act, passed in 1963, prohibited museums and galleries from returning artworks and artefacts to their place of origin, unless they were duplicates, damaged, or unfit for their collections.

It was not until 2022, that the UK government passed a new law that allowed museum trustees to seek approval to return items for 'moral' reasons.

The Herald, Saturday, January 25, 1997

NEWS REDUCED IN SIZE

## Glasgow museum director rejects request from Africa for return of looted artefacts

# Battle royal for Benin relics

**EXCLUSIVE**  
By ALISON HARDIE

THE director of a Scottish museum was at the centre of an international row last night over the rights of a small African nation to reclaim royal artefacts plundered by British colonial troops a century ago.

A formal request by the King of Benin for the return of 22 bronze and ivory relics before the anniversary of their theft in February has been rejected by Mr Julian Spalding, the director of Glasgow's museums.

The struggle to wrest the pieces from Kelvingrove Art Gallery, where they sit in a glass case, has been taken on by Mr Bernie Grant MP, who is also the chairman of the Africa Reparations Movement.

He maintains the controversy echoes Scotland's own fight to have the Stone of Destiny returned from Westminster, granted only last year by the Government.

He has the endorsement of a local Labour MP, Mr George Galloway and, it is understood, the tacit support of Glasgow City Council, which has been advised by Mr Spalding not to comply with demands of the Benin royal family.

Mr Grant is in the city this weekend to champion his cause and to call on Scots to look to their own feelings of national identity to understand what motivates the royals of Benin, which neighbours Nigeria in west Africa.

Yesterday, as he viewed the Benin collection, Mr Grant was involved in an amicable but heated meeting with Mr Mark O'Neill, the museum's head of curatorial services.

Most of the Benin religious and cultural objects currently in British museums and other institutions were looted in February 1897 from Benin City during the battle to carve up Africa into spheres of influence by the major European powers.

Mr Grant, who appeared genuinely moved when shown the majestic carved relics, said: "These belong to a living culture and have a deep historic and social value which goes far beyond the aesthetic and monetary value which they hold in exile."

There are precedents that would allow Glasgow to return the relics to Benin. In 1992, aboriginal human remains were returned to Australia and talks with native Americans led to the return of a Sioux Ghost Shirt, a garment taken from the body of a brave after the US Army slaughtered more than 200 men, women, and children in 1880.

"For many years now, there has been a demand for these religious and cultural objects to be returned to Benin and, as the centenary of their looting approaches, the strength of feeling around this has intensified."

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The largest collection of Benin relics in Britain is held at the Museum of Mankind in London, which refuses to enter into discussions about their return.

Mr Grant, who was acting as a spokesman for the Benin royal family, said: "I am not saying that all of them should be taken away, only the significant ones."

"The Scots set a lot of store on the Stone of Destiny. Now that it has been returned I think the rest of the world will see the Scots as being two-faced if they are quite happy to have their relic returned but not do the same themselves."

"The bottom line here is that we are not in the business of redressing historic wrongs."

These belong to a living culture and have a deep historic value.  
Bernie Grant

Mr Grant said the relics are part of a "surviving and living culture" that relies on them as a guide to traditional ceremonies and dress.

"The Africans draw and make sculptures to consult rather than write things down, many ceremonies are now not being performed satisfactorily because many of the bronzes are missing," he said.

Mr O'Neill said the museum had a "moral imperative to preserve the heritage of Glasgow and enlighten local people about Benin".

However, Mr O'Neill said the museum could be sympathetic to the request despite Mr Spalding's letter, which states: "Though it is possible for our museum service to reconstitute items . . . we cannot advise the City Council that this should happen in this case . . . these artifacts have an important role to play in the public sector."

Mr O'Neill said he would have to be convinced by an independent expert that Glasgow's collection was unique before restitution could be considered. He told Mr Grant: "If we went through every object and assessed how it got here, then we could be in a situation where we were repatriating 60 or 70% of our collection and I don't think society has reached that stage."

Picture: COLIN TEMPLETON

Mark O'Neill puts the point of view of the museum to MP Bernie Grant in front of the Benin exhibit.

'Battle royal for Benin relics', Bishopsgate Institute: BG/ARM/7/3/3



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### TIMELINE OF THE 20TH CENTURY REPARATIONS MOVEMENT

**1951**

Civil Rights Congress presented the United Nations with a case entitled 'We Charge Genocide: Relief from a Crime of the United States Government against the Negro People'

**1990**

The World Conference on Reparations to Africa and Africans in the Diaspora was held in Nigeria

**December 1993**

The Birmingham Conference on Reparations was convened in December 1993, and served as the official launch of the African Reparations Movement UK (A.R.M.). It formed part of a list of activities by Bernie Grant in the aftermath of the Abuja Conference, with the aim of publicising the issue of Reparations

**1993 - 1995**

Between 1993-1995, the Museum of Mankind, within the British Museum, held an exhibition on the Benin Bronzes. A.R.M staged demonstrations . A.R.M. and many other members of the Global Reparations movement were alarmed by the Museum's continued ownership of the Bronzes and the lack of acknowledgement within the exhibition itself, of the harm and violence surrounding the history of the Bronzes, and the historical relationship between Africa and Europe more generally. A.R.M staged demonstrations outside the museum to hold it to account

**1955**

the Reparations Committee for United States Slaves' Descendants was founded by Audley Moore, known widely as Queen Mother Moore

**April 1993**

The First Pan African Conference on Reparations was convened in Abuja, Nigeria. It created the Abuja Proclamation which helped to ignite Reparations activism internationally



**1996**

The Stone of Scone, a famous oblong block of stone which had been used to crown Scottish monarchs since the 13th century, was successfully returned to Scotland by the British Government 700 years after its theft.





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### CURRENT DEBATE

Nigeria has been active for decades, in the ongoing struggle to reclaim its looted artefacts. In March 2002, the Benin Royal Palace and the Federal Ministry of Information and Culture from Nigeria formally requested that “all the cultural property belonging to the Oba of Benin illegally taken away by the British in 1897 should be returned to the rightful owner, the Oba of Benin.”

In 2022, the British Museum announced it would consider ‘loaning’ Benin Bronzes back to Nigerian museums, causing huge backlash. In 2024, it was reported that the British Museum and the V&A museum had reached ‘long-term loan agreements’ for similarly looted artefacts originally from Ghana. This has prompted more debate around the issue of the continual ownership of stolen African artworks.



### QUESTIONS

- 1:** What do you think should be done in order to rectify the looting of the Benin Bronzes, and similar historical events?
- 2:** What have been the main challenges for campaigners demanding the return of the Bronzes?
- 3:** What is the role of a museum in presenting these histories of invasion and colonialism?

Benin Bronzes, displayed at the British Museum